

Elephant Explorers

In the spring of 2020, a herd of wild Asian elephants started migrating north from Southwest China. [As of June 2021, the elephants have traveled 500 kilometers](#), navigating through rural areas and cityscapes toward an unknown destination. Scientists believe this unusual migration [was spurred by](#) deforestation, urbanization, and habitat loss.

Learn more about the migrating elephants from the following sources:

For all grade levels

[“Elephant migration may reveal serious problem for China”](#) from CNN

[General facts about Asian elephants](#) from the World Wildlife Fund

For grades 6 and up

[“Elephants 500km-trek across China baffles scientists”](#) from the BBC

[“How to keep China’s wayward wandering elephants safe?”](#) from *National Geographic*

[“How a Herd of Elephants Won China’s Internet”](#) from the *New York Times*

Questions to Think About

- ① What are some funny and serious consequences of the elephants entering human communities?
- ② Where should the elephants end up? What will finally make a place “home” for them? How should they get there?
- ③ What can humans learn from this herd of elephants?



Elephant and Chinese children, approx. 1794, by Nagasawa Rosetsu (Japanese, 1754–1799). Edo period (1615–1868). Asian Art Museum, Gift of Martha and William Steen, B80D1. Photograph © Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.



Auspicious elephant hanging, approx. 1800–1900. China. Qing dynasty (1644–1911). Embroidery on satin. Asian Art Museum, Gift of Dr. and Mrs. D.G. Dumas, F2005.74.3. Photograph © Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.

ART ACTIVITY

Create Your Own Auspicious Elephant Caravan Hanging

Elephants are seen as auspicious (bringing good luck) in Chinese culture. Indeed, the Asian Art Museum collection includes an auspicious elephant hanging that contains the hidden meaning, “May there be peace, and may your noble house be blessed with wealth and honor!” The elephant is a symbol of peace, and carrying a vase is a pun for peace and safety (*ping an*) in Chinese visual culture. The flowers in the vase are also significant: the Chinese word for “magnolia” is a pun for “noble house,” while the peony is a sign of wealth and honor.

Look Closer

- ① Is this elephant wild or domesticated (tamed)? How do you know?
- ② What surrounds the elephant?

Find these symbols of good luck and blessings in the tapestry: clouds, bats, rocks, flowers. How many different kinds of flowers can you find?

- ③ Can you find the sun peeking out from behind the clouds?



LEFT: Auspicious elephant hanging (detail), approx. 1800–1900. China. Qing dynasty (1644–1911). Embroidery on satin. *Asian Art Museum, Gift of Dr. and Mrs. D.G. Dumas, F2005.74.3.* Photograph © Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.

RIGHT: Wish-granting wand (*ruyi*), 1900–2000. China. Wood. *Asian Art Museum, Gift of Hok Pui Leung and Sally Yu Leung in memory of their fathers Poon On Leung and Dr. Tin Wah Yu, 2007.66.* Photograph © Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.

④ Did you know?

Two symbols of longevity (long life) rise out of the waves at the bottom of the hanging: on the left, we see coral, while on the right, we see a *ruyi* wish-granting wand, which incorporates the fungus of immortality (everlasting life) as its head.

Now, make your own elephants to hang on your wall for good luck!

DURATION

45 min.– 1 hour

MATERIALS

Paper
Black pen
Color pens and pencils

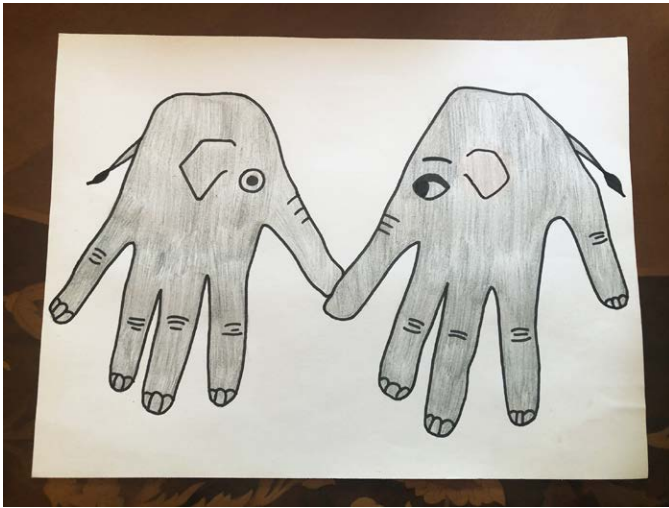
PROCEDURE



① Use a pencil to trace the outline of one of your hands. Ask a friend or family member if you can trace around their hand, too, so you have hands of different sizes and shapes.



② Turn your hand drawings upside down and outline them with the black pen. Then color in each elephant, adding details such as eyes, ears, tails, wrinkles, and toes.



③ Try to make each elephant distinct—how might you convey an elephant’s age or personality? In our example, how are the two elephants different from each other?



④ Think: What habitat would be nice for these elephants to live in? Draw and color in that habitat for your elephants. In our example, the elephants will get to enjoy delicious bamboo.



⑤ Ask your friends and family to create their own hand-elephants and habitats. Then “join hands” and hang all the elephants up together to create a fun caravan on your wall. Where will your elephants go next?